

## **Supports and Strategies at times of Bereavement or Loss**

### ***Behaviour - How bereavement can affect a student's behaviour***

When you and your children are trying to come to terms with the death of someone important, it is hard to know how to deal with difficult behaviour. Often, as a parent or carer, you are at your lowest ebb yourself, so that makes it doubly – or perhaps trebly – difficult to pick a useful way through.

### ***What is normal?***

It can be normal for children to seem to be extra good and extra difficult in the days, weeks and months after the death of someone who was important to them. Children may go quiet and withdrawn, or they may really turn up the volume, literally as well as in troublesome behaviour. They may be able to be kind to you or they may seem furious all the time, behaving as though it is your fault. They may cling to you, or they may ignore you, or most commonly, a mixture of the two.

### ***What helps? Remembering that children grieve too***

Remember that your children are also experiencing the turmoil, pain and confusion that happens when someone important dies. Unlike adults who cannot escape from this for a second, children do 'puddle jump'. They are able to turn off and feel quite OK but then they will suddenly be overwhelmed by what has happened, they will jump back into a puddle. Then, they will jump out of it again and go off and play – until they encounter the next puddle.

### ***Keeping a balance***

Try to keep a balance between having things pretty much as they were before – if you never let the children do x or y, don't let them do it now (unless there is a good reason of course!) If, for example, they always had a regular bed time, you may have to give them extra cuddles and reassurance around bed time but don't think you have to drop all your old rules and customs and at the same time, understand that they are struggling to manage all sorts of complicated feelings and worries, so they may get distracted, short tempered, angry or aggressive. You won't want to let them hurt themselves or anyone else, so you will want to try to contain that behaviour while showing them that you understand why it is happening.

### ***Keep explaining***

Make sure that they understand as fully as they can what happened and what is going to happen. When children worry it often comes out in difficult behaviour. Children and young people overhear adults and put 2 and 2 together to make up their minds. Check that they have the facts, not their worst imaginings. And keep checking that they understand what has happened and what is happening now.

### ***Involving them***

Involve the children as much as you can in as much as you can. One of the worst feelings is of being left out or even shut out. Helping children to anticipate what will happen, preparing them for difficult or possibly upsetting events means that they may be able to be part of them. Sharing in what happens helps.

### ***Keep talking***

Talk about the person who died. This can be hard, particularly as time goes on, but keep mentioning them in an everyday way. Also keep telling the children things about the person, so that they go on having a real picture, a real sense of the person they are missing.

### ***Younger students 0-5 years of age***

Children up to 5 or 6 years, developmentally, don't know the name for what they are feeling. They just know that the world feels all different and horrible and their tummy feels funny and somehow it comes out as a tantrum in the supermarket or somewhere else.

They may be more clingy than usual, or more scared (of real things or pretend ones like giants and monsters).

They may behave as though they are younger than they are; young children often seem to lose skills that they have mastered so they may go back to wetting themselves or waking often in the night.

They may 'act out' the story of what happened to the person who died. They may have tummy aches or headaches, or their toys may. Remember that a lot of the time they will behave as though nothing has happened. This is normal. They will remember too, but not all the time.

***What can help***

Help them know that what they are feeling is understandable, comfort them, help them to feel safe while making sure they know that having a tantrum, thumping their little brother or refusing to stay in bed, is not OK.

Help them to know that it is alright to feel sad, frightened, lonely and that sometimes you feel that way too.

***Keep routines going.***

Don't be afraid to say 'no' if that is what you would always have said in the past. You can add extra cuddles and reassurance and be a bit flexible where you or your child needs you to be.

Make sure they understand what has happened. Use words that others are using (like dead) even if you think they are too young to understand them; they will hear them anyway and it will be reassuring to hear you say them.

Talk about the person who has died, tell them stories about the person, and remind them what the person was like.

***Older students 6-11 years of age***

Children aged 6 to 11 years, developmentally, may know what the feeling is called but they may not connect it with the death of someone important.

They are looking for reassurance, comfort and a sense that the adults are still in charge as well as an acceptance that they too are suffering and struggling.

Children of this age often try to comfort their parent or key adults in their life; they may hide their own distress or act it out at school or at home, but not necessarily in all places or with all people. They may be unusually good or unusually 'naughty'. They may be uncharacteristically clingy or behave as though they are younger than they really are.

***What can help:***

As with younger children, don't be afraid to say 'no' if that is what you would always have said in the past. You can add extra cuddles and reassurance and be a bit flexible where you or your child needs you to be.

Drawing and making things together is a great way to talk about difficult things.

Remember that at this age, like the younger ones, a lot of the time they will behave as though nothing has happened. This is normal. They will remember too, but not all the time.

Make sure they understand what has happened. Remember that their understanding will mature as they grow older so you will need to go over what happened as time passes. They will be able to understand more and make better sense of events.

Talk about the person who has died; share stories about him or her, encourage children of this age to make cards, draw pictures to express their feelings and their memories

***Teenagers***

Life is full of very complicated feelings if you are a teenager and trying to deal with bereavement just adds to the complications.

The main thing to remember is that 12-18s tend to be very unpredictable – one minute they are looking after you very nicely and the next they are slamming out of the house in a temper. They may seem to be inconsolable until their phone goes and they seem to be able to chat happily to a friend. Friends and the outside world are very important. You may feel they are given priority over your needs – it helps to try to make space for both. Teenagers can be wonderfully supportive of each other.

Teenagers often take things very personally so it may feel deeply unfair that this thing has happened to them. Feeling hard done by can make people cross and aggressive. Acknowledging that it is not fair, that it is hard, will help.

Teenagers may want to talk to you all the time – often in the middle of your night – or they may hardly acknowledge your presence. Try to talk when they are open to it – it will be appreciated. And try not to put pressure on them to confide in you – they may be more comfortable talking to others. But do keep checking that they are OK.

Sometimes talking is just too complicated and painful. You can keep communicating by leaving them a little note (like a post it on the fridge or their bedroom door), sending text messages, e-mail. Don't be put off by not getting a response – your effort will be being appreciated, deep down.

Teenagers are notorious for their risk-taking behaviour. When they are trying to cope with a death in the family this may become more pronounced. As with younger children – try and keep to the old expectations while making some allowances